

## **Muck**

Vacation house in the country.

Alicia told us her uncle had promised she and her friends the use of his "vacation house in the country" for the weekend. So the four of us got in the car - me, Alicia, Grace, and Carl - and we drove sixteen hours from New York to friggin' Iowa.

We were exhausted by the time we got there. We were already pretty pissed from the trip, which was mostly spent telling Alicia of all the painful things we'd do to her if it wasn't worth it. When we got there, though, everyone calmed down a bit. It actually seemed really nice. It was an old farm house, but in really good shape. It had a nice covered porch, and it was surrounded by green fields all around. I could only see one other house off in the distance.

We got out and stretched our legs.

The sky was a dark gray; it would definitely rain all weekend. If not fun, it'd at least be relaxing.

All of a sudden this guy, apparently in his fifties, with this gray scraggly beard and extremely noticeable beer gut appeared on the porch, wearing nothing but a pair of overalls. Honestly, I should have known we were in for a treat the moment I saw that Alicia's uncle was a walking stereotype.

He came down the stairs and hugged Alicia. He introduced himself as Ezra, and she started introducing us.

"Well," Ezra said, "you're all welcome to the, uh... vacation house. Get in the truck, I'll take ya out there in a minute."

I knew it. I knew it the whole way up there, and I could see from the looks on my friends' faces that now they knew it too. A thousand hidden words were betrayed by that one short pause. This "vacation house" was not going to live up to expectations.

We all crammed into Ezra's pickup and drove, no joke, another hour out to this place we'd been promised. Eventually we went off road, and for the last twenty minutes of the drive, the ground was nothing but dirt all around. Finally, we came to a stop. We all got out of the truck, and looked on in horror at what was in front of us - what was essentially a two-story shed.

Dark, decaying wood, with no features except for two windows, one for each floor, one right above the other, and the door. It was almost as if it was designed to look bizarre. The windows were on the middle-left, and the door on the far right. It was when I noticed this that it dawned on me how strange this would all look from a distance. This structure, which itself didn't seem real, the one elevated thing in the middle of miles of flat dirt.

Nobody said anything, but I'm pretty sure Carl would have, if not for my strategically timed elbowing. I took a step forward, and found that it took some extra effort to pull my foot up. This wasn't just dirt - it was muck. We had checked the weather before coming and knew that it would be rainy, but we thought we'd be spending most of our time indoors. In The Shed, as we dubbed it, there wasn't nearly enough room for that. Ezra got out of the truck to show us around.

We walked in, and found that it was even smaller than it looked. Outside, we had been facing the broad side. The room was twenty feet long, but only about eight feet in width. Thanks to the furniture, it looked even smaller. On the left side, by the window, was a fireplace. Near it were two small couches that sat perpendicular to each other, forming a snug little box with the couches as two sides, and the window and fireplace as the others. On the side opposite the one from which we entered were two doors, one on the far left, the other on the right. Ezra said the one on the right was the bathroom. Also on the right side was a tall, round table and two stools, one of which was pushed out of the way when the door was opened.

Ezra led us to the door on the left, and we had to squeeze

between the wall and the couch. This door led to a steep, cramped staircase, which led up to the next floor. It was pitch black in the stairway, and we had to use the flashlights we had brought to get up without causing a human avalanche.

The second floor wasn't much brighter. I mean, the first floor was dark, but down there we had the door open. Up here the only light source was the window. The room was the same size as the first floor, but it was a little less crowded with furniture. On the side by the window were two small dressers, and on the other were four dusty old beds, side by side. There were scratch marks on the wall where one had obviously been shoved in with no room to spare.

We followed Ezra outside, thanked him, and started to bring our stuff in as he got in the truck.

"I almost forgot," he said, "I got three electric lanterns in the back. Take 'em, you're gonna need 'em if you want to light the place."

We took the lanterns, and he drove off. The first drops of rain started to fall, and my friends went inside. It was then that I realized that we had no transportation. It was only Friday, and until Sunday at noon, there we would stay.

By about nine PM it was raining buckets, and the lightning had started. Grace and Alicia were on the couches by the fireplace, reading. Carl and I were sitting at the table trying to think of things to do the next day. Among the things we suggested were making mud angels, having a mud fight, and building a mud man. We had nothing.

We had just invented mud jet-skiing when we heard Grace call us over. We looked up and noticed that she and Alicia had stopped reading, and were now staring intently out the window. We walked over, and I started to ask what was wrong. Alicia shushed me.

Grace looked up and whispered, "I think there's someone out there."

With the four of us crammed against each other, I waited for my eyes to adjust. It was difficult to see, but against the sky, I could barely make out what looked like the upper body of a person about a hundred feet away. Something about the shape looked off, too, like it was oddly curved.

"I noticed him a few minutes ago," Grace said.

The silhouette did not seem to be moving, and I briefly thought about going outside to ask if he needed help, but I just had such a bad feeling about this guy. We were so far from any houses, and who would just walk all the way out here, in the rain no less?

There was another flash of lightning, and I caught a glimpse of yellow. It was a fraction of a second, but the image was clear in my mind. Now I realized the reason for the strange shape; he was wearing a raincoat. He also seemed to be drenched in muck.

We watched him, and he us, for almost an hour. Then, as quickly as the visitor had arrived, we watched his head drop below the horizon, and we lost sight of him. We waited and waited, but we didn't see him again. Finally, we decided to go to bed.

Starting the next morning, we definitely weren't bored anymore. We all wanted to find out what had happened the night before, and so right after breakfast we went outside to look around. It was still drizzling, and Carl noted that his boots sank deeper in the muck than the day before.

I was the last one out the door. I reached back to shut it behind me, and recoiled when my hand came away wet. I started shaking my hand, and clumps of muck were sent flying. Everyone looked back at me. When I had calmed down, I realized that the door knob was covered in the stuff.

We searched the area around The Shed, then where the guy had been standing. We didn't find anything. The only evidence that we'd really seen anyone at all was the mud on the door, and

Grace was now freaking out and going on about how he'd tried to get in and that we had to go.

We went back inside and sat down on the couches. Alicia tried to comfort Grace, and told her that she'd call Ezra to come pick us up if anything else happened.

We sat around and talked for the rest of the day, but it was obvious that everyone was just killing time until nightfall. When it became dark enough to light the fire, everyone immediately huddled around the window. We waited for hours. Every once in a while, someone would shout, "I see him!", and then, "Never mind." Eventually, we decided that something interesting was too good to be true. We went to bed, half relieved, half disappointed.

I woke up early on Sunday morning. The wind was hitting the window so hard it rattled, and I could hear bullets of rain hitting the roof. It was pouring.

I checked my watch: Six AM. Six more hours and we were out of there. I sat up in bed and saw that the others were still asleep. I realized I was freezing. The place was already pretty chilly, with its barely-existent insulation, but this was very noticeably colder.

I crawled to the foot of the bed (the only way off, since they were wedged together). There was little light coming in through the window, but once my eyes adjusted, I could see that one of the dressers was on its side. The drawers from both were scattered about the room, along with their contents.

I woke the others, and for a time, we all just sat up in bed staring. Alicia promised Grace that this time she'd call Ezra for an early pickup. Carl reached over and switched on one of the lanterns. He said something, but we couldn't hear him over the rain. I told him to speak up.

"I said the friggin' door is open."

We stared in silence. Even with the lantern on, everything past

the door frame was pitch black, and it felt like at any moment something might spring out from the darkness. We picked out the few clean sets of clothes from the floor and dressed. I agreed to be the first one down the stairs.

There, we found the front door open as well. We closed it, and Grace opened the duffel bag containing our breakfast bars. As she, Carl, and I ate, Alicia went upstairs to get her backpack. We heard her rummaging around above us, and after a few minutes, she came stomping back down the stairs.

"Have any of you seen my bag? My phone is in it."

We all shook our heads, and she did a quick search of the room. As she was looking by the fireplace, she glanced out the window and stopped.

"No way..."

Grace asked what was wrong, but Alicia ignored her, put on her poncho, and went outside. I told Carl to wait with Grace and did the same. Stepping out, I realized that my boots were almost totally submerged in the muck. The rain was hitting me like bullets, and although it was early in the morning, the cloudy sky made it look like evening.

Through the rain, I could see Alicia standing about thirty feet away, staring down at something and shaking her head. I made my way over and saw that she had found her backpack, half-submerged.

We brought it inside and set it down by the door. After removing our boots and ponchos, Alicia started digging and retrieved her phone. As expected, it wouldn't turn on. Grace, who was watching, put her head down on the table.

Alicia reassured her, "Uncle Ezra's coming at noon anyway."

I checked my watch. Five more hours to go.

We sat at the couches. We were just chatting about whatever came to mind, but it was obviously just a cover for the anxiety. Occasionally we thought we heard the *\*schlock schlock schlock\** of footsteps outside, but we couldn't see anything from the window.

Finally, noon came. Then one PM. Then three. Then six.

What were we supposed to do now? Without the phone there was no way to call for help. And where was Ezra?

At around nine, we again heard the now familiar *\*schlock schlock schlock\** outside. It was dark now, and when we looked this time, the light from the fire prevented us from seeing outside. Instead, we could see only the room being reflected in the window. I wanted to be safe, and it was warm enough, so I got down on my knees and put out the fire. Behind me, Alicia screamed.

I looked to the window and, for a split second, locked eyes with a gray face. Before it even fully registered, it was gone. It was so quick I couldn't even be sure I'd seen anything, but from the looks on my friends' faces, I could tell we'd all seen it.

Grace was in hysterics. Alicia, once again, was trying to calm her down. It was pretty clear that she was running out of things to say, and she herself was clearly just as freaked out. Carl was pacing back and forth, and I kept watching the window. It was impossible to see anything through the rain and the darkness.

There was a loud crash from upstairs. Then, for a moment, there was silence. Even the rain seemed to tense. Finally, there was a sound from above.

*\*schlock schlock schlock schlock\**

Grace whimpered, and Carl swooped down and put his hand over her mouth. I sat up and pushed the couch against the door to the stairs. We listened to it move about the room. Sometimes, it

would go quiet for a few seconds, and then we'd hear something drag along the floor, or there'd be a sudden impact that would make clouds of dust fall from the ceiling.

We were so intently focused on what was happening above that we jumped at the sound of a knock on the door. We turned to face it, and there was another knock.

Alicia said, practically whispering, "That's Uncle Ezra!"

She ran for the door.

I yelled, "Wait up a second!"

She already had her hand on the door knob, and turned to me.

"Why?", she demanded.

"How can you be sure it's him? What if it's not?"

Another knock.

She reached for the knob again, then hesitated.

"Uncle Ezra?"

Silence.

"...Uncle-"

There was a loud bang on the door, and Alicia jumped back, nearly tripping over a stool as she went. Whatever was on the other side was now rapidly smashing it, and I was afraid the door was going to come down. It didn't let up for a full minute. Just as the door seemed about to come off its hinges, the banging stopped. I could hear something on the other side sloshing away.

Carl tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to see what he wanted, and he pointed toward the ceiling.

He asked me, in a whisper, "Do you still hear it?"

I listened for a second.

"No."

"Me neither. I think whatever it was is gone."

Alicia asked, "That's the second floor, how could it get out?"

Carl snapped back, "I don't know, same way it got in?"

Half an hour passed, and during that time, we didn't see or hear anything, besides the wind and the rain. Eventually though, Grace mentioned that she felt a little weird. When we stopped and thought about it, we realized we could all feel it.

I happened to be looking toward the table when I saw an empty bottle of water, which had been on its side all day, roll off. The four of us exchanged a look that showed we had all come to the same conclusion:

The Shed was tipping.

I'd like to think we're bright enough to have foreseen this, had things not happened as they did. The thing had no foundation, and now the soil under it was so loose it might as well have been built on a swamp.

We talked it over briefly and, reluctantly - so, *so reluctantly*, we all agreed that we couldn't stay there. Before we could leave though, we'd need some lights. That was a problem, because all we had down there was one flashlight. The lanterns, as well as our other flashlight, were upstairs. Grace started to panic at the idea of going up there, and Carl agreed to stay with her while Alicia and I retrieved the lights.

I pulled the couch away from the door. Before I could open it, Carl

reached out and stopped me.

"I can't hear it, but that doesn't mean it's gone. Careful up there."

I nodded, readied my flashlight, and slowly opened the door.

I walked into the stairway, and shone the light at the top. The door to the upstairs was open, but the coast was otherwise clear. I took a step, and there was a wet noise from underneath. I looked down and realized there was muck on the floor. Whatever was upstairs had come down to the door. How had we not heard it? I looked to Alicia and realized she'd noticed too.

We ascended the stairs cautiously, and the closer we got, the louder the wind became. At the top, I signaled for Alicia to stop. I was shaking, and it was evident in the beam of light. I tensed, mentally counted to three, and leapt into the doorway, shining the light around the room. I waved Alicia in.

The window was shattered, and the rain was pouring in. The wind was almost deafening now. The idea of going outside seemed even worse than before.

I held the light as Alicia searched, and during this time we noticed that the beds had all been pulled out, some overturned, and their mattresses shredded. In the mess, she was only able to find one working lantern. She found another, but it had been smashed.

Back downstairs, we found that Carl and Grace had already put on their ponchos and were ready to go. As unsure as they were about going outside, apparently they were even more concerned about The Shed falling over. I told them we'd only found a single lantern.

Carl yelled, "That's not enough, we'd barely have enough light with all of them!"

I thought back to the wind upstairs. "We're only going to be able to carry two lights anyway."

"Why?"

"Because we're going out holding hands. We're not going to be able to see or hear anything out there."

Carl clearly didn't like it, but agreed. We formed a chain: I'd be in front with the flashlight, then Grace, Alicia, and Carl in the back with the lantern. We stood by the door, hand in hand, and I looked back at my friends. They all nodded that they were ready to go. I swung the door open, and we started the march.

The wind was the strongest I'd ever felt, and it seemed like at any moment we'd all be blown away completely. The rain was hitting so hard it actually stung a little, like a swarm of angry hornets. The muck was so deep now that it was over the tops of my boots, and I could feel my socks soaking it in.

After a few minutes, I heard Grace cry out. I shone my light around, and thought I saw a shape move out of view, but I couldn't be sure.

It went on like that for a long time. I'd think I could see something moving, but it would always disappear from view when I'd shine my light. I could tell when one of the others had seen something too, because the entire line would shake when someone flinched.

A few times I thought I saw my light catch the reflective yellow of the raincoat guy, but again, it was always so brief I could never be sure.

Once, even over the wind and the rain, I heard Carl scream. I whipped around to see him jerking his head around and kicking wildly. He calmed down and took hold of Alicia's hand again, and I saw him tell her something. She hesitated a moment, then told Grace, who clutched my hand tighter, and told me that Carl said he felt something grab him.

We slowly made our way forward, and for a while, we stopped seeing things. Eventually, my light caught something that didn't

move. Even pointing the light directly at it, I couldn't make out any details. As we moved closer, I could make out that it was metallic and rectangular. Closer still, and I saw that my light reflected off of the dark space above it that I had believed to be sky.

I didn't realize until we were only a few feet away that what we were approaching was Ezra's truck, wheels sunk deep in the muck.

We were standing closer together now. Carl nodded for me to open the door. I reached out and yanked it open - empty.

Alicia insisted that we stay there, in case Ezra came back. Carl wanted to keep going, but relented when she pointed out that we didn't even know where the road was. We climbed inside.

Although the rain hitting the roof was loud, it was significantly less so than outside, and my ears were ringing. Alicia pointed said that Ezra must have gotten stuck in the muck on the way to The Shed. It was here that we spent the night. Occasionally, we'd hear what sounded like something hitting one of the doors, but we couldn't see a thing past the windows. Shining a light only produced glare. We were far too tense to sleep.

After what felt like forever, the sun started to rise. The rain slowed to a drizzle, then stopped altogether. When it was sufficiently bright, we decided to look for the road.

We got out and stretched our legs.

We could hear the sound of an engine. Looking around, we realized the road wasn't far off, and there was a vehicle approaching. We made it to the road before it passed. The jeep, with its oversized wheels, came to a stop. The door opened, and out stepped who else but Absent Uncle Ezra. He looked us up and down.

"Shoot, what happened to you?"

All we told him was that The Shed wasn't safe, and that we had to leave. When we asked where he'd been, he said he'd tried to pick us up in the truck and gotten stuck. He'd tried to call Alicia's phone, but there'd been no answer. When we ran into him, he was on his way to pick us up in something more suited for the job.

We got in the truck, and he said he wanted to go see how The Shed was holding up. We refused to go back there. He seemed annoyed and confused, but agreed to take us back to the house before going out again.

When he got back, he told us that we'd been right to get out of there when we did - The Shed had fallen over and broken apart.

The next day, during the drive back, I asked Carl how he didn't notice anything approach him or run away when he was grabbed.

"I couldn't see it," he said, "because it didn't grab my arm. Somehow, it grabbed my boot - from underneath."